

## Rediscovery of the Oriental Bay-Owl *Phodilus badius* in peninsular India

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The Oriental Bay-Owl *Phodilus badius* is an enigma in Indian ornithology. Three disjunct, widely separated populations exist, and the bird is apparently very rare in all three areas. What little that is known about the species is from occasional observations of the northern race *P. b. saturatus*, the range of which extends from Sikkim through Manipur to Viet Nam. Of the other two populations, *P. b. ripleyi* apparently occurs in a very small section of the southern Western Ghats of India. Until recently it was known only from a single specimen taken at Periasolai (10°36'N 76°40'E) in the Nelliampathy Hills, Kerala (Hussain and Khan 1978). The third race, *P. b. assimilis*, occurs in Sri Lanka, whence it is known from about a dozen specimens.

On 14 February 1992 my tribal field assistant Natarajan, while leading a group of tourists inside Karian Shola, a well-known patch of forest in the Anaimalai Hills, came across an Oriental Bay-Owl sleeping on the limb of a small tree in deep evergreen forest. The bird was photographed and I was able to confirm the identification from the prints. This record was from about 30 m to the west of the Tamil Nadu - Kerala border, in the Sungam range of Parambikulam Wildlife Sanctuary (10°28'N 76°50'E). The spot is about 1.2 km from Top Slip town in Tamil Nadu. Natarajan informed me that one of the members of the group poked the sleeping bird with a long stick, resulting in the bird opening its eyes briefly before going back to sleep. On further disturbance the bird reluctantly took flight and settled elsewhere. This incident lends support to the statement in Ali and Ripley (1987) that it 'Is greatly incommoded by, and practically helpless in daylight'.

I combed the area next day with Natarajan, but failed to see the bird. From then on I kept a sharp look-out for the species during daily forays inside Karian Shola and, on 6 April, in deep evergreen forest along the trail towards Pandaravarai Hill, I spotted an Oriental Bay-Owl perched on the rim of a tree-hole about 10 m up. I made a careful field sketch and showed the bird to my tribal tracker, Velli. The most striking feature of this handsome owl is the broad V extending across the flat pale face. The little ear-tufts and faint spots on the breast could be seen with binoculars. It stared at me with half-open eyes for a while and then, almost imperceptibly shuffled deeper into the cavity. This sighting was about 1 km north-east of the February record, within the Indira Gandhi Wildlife Sanctuary, Tamil Nadu. I presume that these two sightings relate to different individuals, considering the time and distance between the two encounters. The fact that a careful search for the bird was successful in finding it suggests that it may be more common than

is believed - it may well have been overlooked due to its strictly nocturnal habits and the low density of populations. It may occur further south in sanctuaries such as Kalakkad (Tamil Nadu) and Periyar (Kerala), where similar habitat exists. A thorough, systematic survey is needed to ascertain the true status and distribution of this subspecies.

The Periasolai area in the Nelliampathies, where the type specimen was collected in a coffee estate, was largely 'wet evergreen forest' (Hussain and Khan 1978), but is now a vast clearing with tapioca plantations (K. Subban, Tamil Nadu Forest Department, verbally). Much of the Nelliampathy Hills are now denuded but the Anamalais, with two wildlife sanctuaries covering over 1,250 km<sup>2</sup>, enjoy better protection, especially with the recent elevation of Karian Shola to the status of a National Park. This must be important for the survival of this rare owl, which is only known from the Anamalai-Nelliampathy hills.

I thank Natarajan for first reporting the species to me and for presenting the photograph to me; Arul Jothi for his description from the February sighting; and to V. Santharam, K. K. Neelakantan and Z. Futehally for their comments and suggestions.

This note is dedicated to the late Professor Neelakantan for his contributions to the ornithology of Kerala. He reviewed this manuscript but, unfortunately, did not live to see it in print.

#### REFERENCES

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## **Black-billed Magpie *Pica pica*: a new species for Thailand**

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On 7 and 8 April, 1989, Julia Watola and I watched a Black-billed Magpie *Pica pica* at Doi Ang Khang, north Thailand. It was present at 10h00 on both occasions, perched in a small leafless tree about 30 m from the road. When we stopped to observe it more closely, it flew off giving a chatter I knew as